The Unincorporated Hamlet

A Vanishing Aspect of the Rural Landscape

Jeffrey Winstel

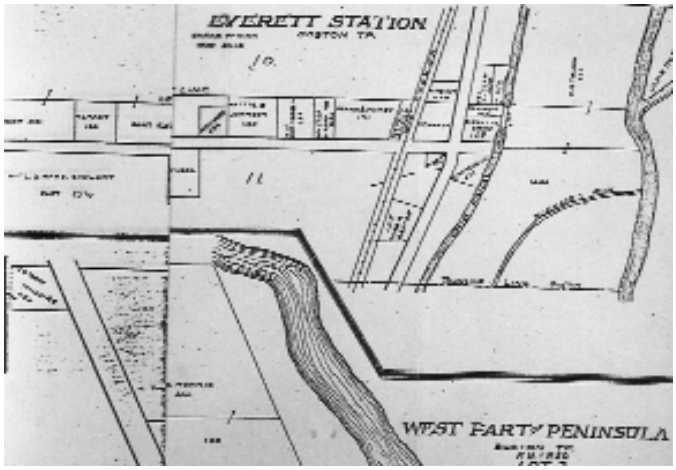
In an urban area of northeast Ohio, between Cleveland and Akron, the Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area preserves a rural landscape. At a crossroads in the recreation area is a remarkably nondescript collection of buildings known as Everett. This blink-of-an-eye on the landscape could be effectively marked by placing the "Welcome to …" and the "Thank you for visiting…" salutations on opposite sides of the same road sign.

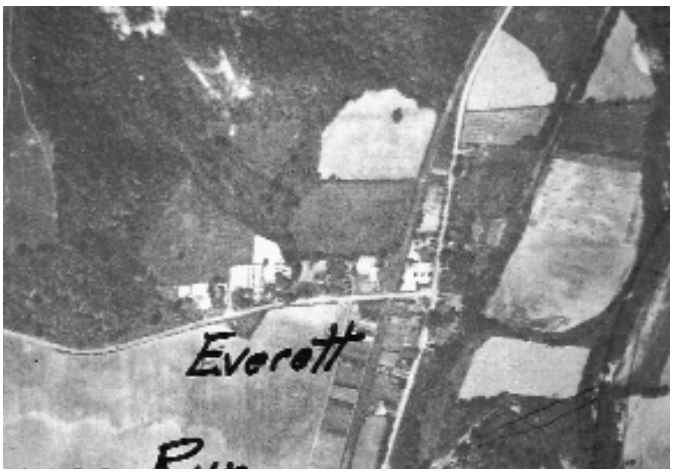
Indistinct crossroad communities like Everett are found throughout the country, and in many National Park Service units. Although their presence indicates a role in the settlement process, the buildings' unassuming appearances do not convey historic or cultural importance. Despite this, the Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area plans to preserve Everett's buildings and setting through a phased rehabilitation project. An assessment of the social and economic processes that shaped the community revealed Everett's eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places as a locally significant example of a formerly dominant settlement pattern. Other national parks with historic agricultural land uses may also find examples of this settlement type within their boundaries. This article may help them identify and document this vanishing element of the rural landscape.

Geographer Walter Cristaller used the rural landscape in Germany to develop his Central Place Theory of economic geography. His theory identifies the hamlet as the smallest settlement unit that provides a few primary services to a small local hinterland. Like Everett, the communities in Cristaller's study group were tied to the local agricultural economy.

In 1943, University of Wisconsin climatologist and geographer Glenn T. Trewartha published a study on the rural hamlet. In his article "The Unincorporated Hamlet: An Overlooked Aspect of the American Landscape" he stated that, except for the isolated farmstead, the unincorporated hamlet was the second most common settlement type found in rural America.[1]

Trewartha identified several characteristics of these communities. Using the crossroads settlements in southwestern Wisconsin, he noted that the unincorporated hamlet lacked internal street patterns and had no business core. The distance between the outermost buildings in these communities did not exceed one-quarter of a mile. Typical functional units included residences, farm outbuildings, a school, a church, blacksmith shop or garage, and a tavern. Most of the citizens of these communities were farmers, with professionals being limited to preachers and teachers.[2]





These images provide strong evidence of Everett's integrity as an unincorporated hamlet settlement type. The 1910 Summit County Atlas Map (top) depicts a community easily recognized in a 1938 aerial photograph (middle), and a 1992 aerial photograph (bottom). Note the similarities in the field patterns depicted in the aerial photographs.

Hamlets typically are associated with the initial settlement period. The arrival of homesteaders created a need for a place to receive and send mail. The United States Congress had the power to establish post offices and postal roads throughout the 19th and early-20th century. Fourth class post offices, often located in general stores,

*(**Hamlet**—continued on page 26)*

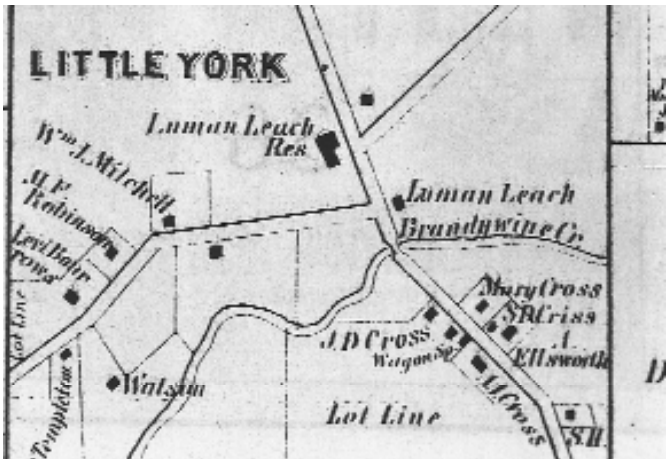
(***Hamlet***—*continued from page 25)*

became very powerful centralizing forces on the rural landscape.[3]

The decline in the number of unincorporated hamlets is directly linked to the changes in postal service and related changes in road quality. Rural free delivery, which was long advocated by farmers, began experimentally in 1896 and was permanently adopted a few years later. In order to qualify for rural free delivery, local governments spent millions of dollars on road improvements between 1897 and 1908.[4] The first federal road census in 1904 showed that out of two million miles of road, only 153,664 were "improved," which included roads covered only with sawdust, sand, or clay.[5] By the end of World War I, over 300,000 miles of road were hard-surfaced.[6]

Rural free delivery service drastically reduced the number of small community post offices and, subsequently, the businesses in which post offices were housed. These commercial establishments were dependent on the traffic that the postal service generated for them. Paul H. Landis's studies of rural trade centers in the early-20th century concluded that small unincorporated places were decreasing due to increases in surface highways and the decline of the fourth-class post office. Trewartha's article noted that in 1920, Herbert Hoover's committee reporting on recent economic changes in the country found a shift from country trading centers to larger commercial centers.[7]

Although hamlets declined in numbers, they did not die out. Trewartha found the unincorporated hamlets in the 1930s were less complete service centers. These hamlets were characterized by more taverns, filling stations, and garages. Some general stores survived due to the lower overhead and reduced operating costs which enabled them to sell for less. Churches and schools also remained common features of hamlets in the 1930s, but agricultural buildings were not apparent.[8]



The Hamlet of Little York in the 1874 county atlas is not found at the crossroads today.

The early-19th-century genesis of Everett is tied to the Ohio & Erie Canal. Alanson Swan, the largest land owner in the community, operated a grocery store, warehouse, and one of the largest livery stables along the canal. After the decline of the packet-boat era (1837-1852), Everett changed very little until the arrival of the railroad. In 1880, the Valley Railway established a depot near the crossroads and gave the community the name of Everett, after the secretary-treasurer of the railway company. Along with the establishment of rail transportation came the community's first post office.

Rather than servicing canal traffic, the crossroads depended on, and consisted of, the surrounding farming community. Census records from this period list farming as the dominant occupation, and business directories include a general merchandise retailer, a blacksmith, a livery and feed stable, and a saloon. The train provided the chief link with the outside world by bringing in the mail and shipping out farm produce.

With the rise of the automobile came the decline of Everett. In 1931, the one-room schoolhouse was closed, electricity arrived, and the railroad station agent was transferred. In 1935 the depot was dismantled and the road leading to the city of Akron was hard-surfaced. The character of Everett changed from a self-contained farming community to a group of residences dependent on services found outside the crossroads.

Surviving buildings in Everett were constructed primarily between 1880-1930, the farming community-era. Physical characteristics that Trewartha used to describe the pre-automobile hamlet are evident. Buildings are oriented to the historic roadways, and there is no internal street system that would give Everett a presence set apart from these roadways. The businesses that were located in Everett were randomly spaced, not clustered around a core area. A farmstead is also found in Everett, consisting of a house, privy, barn, chicken coop, and corn crib.

Historic maps show the remaining buildings match Trewartha's social profile for the hamlet type. The gas station / general store building remains, as does the church. The school was converted to a residence in 1936. Postal service in Everett started in 1880. Various general store owners were listed as the postmaster or postmistress, the last one being Miss Frank I. (Ivel) Kepner in 1917. Most important, the community is still surrounded by farming. The rural setting of Everett suggests a strong association with an agrarian economy.

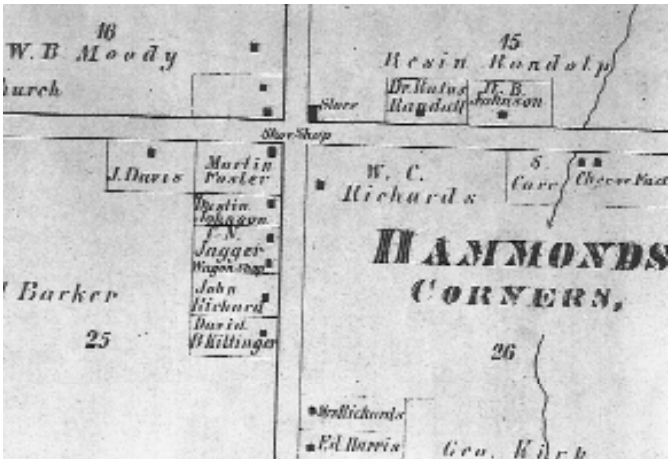
Everett was not the only settlement of this type in the lower Cuyahoga River Valley. The dominant theme of the 19th-century landscape in the valley was agriculture, naturally giving rise to several of these settlements in the area.

A review of the *1874 Combination Atlas Map of Summit County, Ohio,* and the *1891 Cuyahoga County Atlas Maps* resulted in a list of nine small crossroads settlements that once existed in or near the Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area. Additional settlements of this type are described in the 1880 Valley Railway tourist guide. Settlements with internal street systems were excluded from this comparative group. Two of the nine crossroads now display common 20th-century fates for the unincorporated hamlet.

The establishment of Little York in 1825 coincided with the construction of a saw mill. In 1856, there were 12 families living in Little York and the 1874 atlas shows a school, a wagon shop, and 14 residences. Today, 1950s suburban housing and a convenience mart make up this community.

Hammond's Corners once boasted the "second largest general store in the state." A 19th-century bird's-eye

schematic of this crossroads community shows 13 buildings, which included a church, a hotel, a doctor's house, a buggy works, and four residential structures. The 1874 county atlas shows Hammond's Corners as consisting of 20 buildings, 11 of which were residences. Although Hammond's Corners retains the sense of being a small crossroads community, the heavily asphalted lots fronting the gas station, post office, and modern bank building negate the sense of association with a historic agrarian lifestyle.



The density depicted on an 1874 map of Hammond's corners is similar to the community today, but modern structures and front lot parking have changed the rural nature of the hamlet.

Everett is the best example of this historic settlement type within the local context area. The historic integrity of the crossroads qualified Everett for National Register of Historic Places status. Modern construction in Everett has been minimal, limited to a few garages. Although several buildings have been remodeled, these buildings retain their massing, scale, and set-back. Trees and grass still dominate the landscape, instead of driveways and parking spaces. Surrounding land use patterns have been retained and will be preserved through an agricultural use easement.

Preservation planning for Everett began with a charette process that resulted in The Conceptual Design for Everett Village, prepared by the Denver Service Center of the National Park Service. The charette team consisted of personnel from the Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area, the Midwest Regional Office, and the Denver Service Center. Professional backgrounds of participants included planning, history, historical landscape architecture, historical architecture, park operations and management. The team concluded that Everett would best serve as a combination of office and residential facilities, along with low-impact visitor service and recreational centers compatible with visitor uses throughout Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area.

The team stressed the specific qualities of the community that needed to be considered throughout the planning, design, and construction phases of the project in order to retain Everett's character. Densities should not exceed those found in the community during its period of historic significance (1880-1935). Existing vistas and corridors need to be retained and stand-alone functions should be maximized. Internal circulation should be minimized and outbuildings should not be left to fall into disrepair. The scale of parking should be limited to what is appropriate at individual sites and additional parking will be screened from the area.

Preserving the existing landscape and repairing, rather than replacing, sound historic fabric will prevent Everett from becoming something akin to an enlargement of a model train town. Everett needs to keep the look of a small community where the people made a modest living from the surrounding land. A Section 106 Programmatic Agreement is currently being negotiated with the Ohio Historic Preservation Office and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation that will specify appropriate treatments for the rehabilitation of this National Register of Historic Places district.

A former resident of Everett remembers a childhood without conveniences such as running water and electricity. Despite this, these memories give her reason to agree with Andy Rooney's sentiment that "It might be a better country if we didn't have mail delivery at all. One of the healthiest things for any community is a post office where everyone comes to pick up the mail."

Notes

1 Glenn Trewartha, "The Unincorporated Hamlet: One Element of the American Settlement Fabric", AAAG (1943): 32-75.

2 Ibid., 59.

3 Ibid., 39.

4 Beth Grosvenor, National Register of Historic Places Bulletin 13 (Washington DC, U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1984) p. 2.

5 Val Hart, *The Story of American Roads,* (Garden City, N.Y., The Country Life Press, 1950) p. 183.

6 Ibid., p. 196.

7 Trewartha., p. 43.

8 Ibid., p. 61.

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